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REASON & REVELATION

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Studying **Science** From a **Biblical** Perspective

Does
GOD
Know the
FUTURE?

An Immersive
**SCIENCE LEARNING
EXPERIENCE** for
High Schoolers

Jesus'
Birth in
Bethlehem:
Fact or
Fiction?



Studying Science from a Biblical Perspective

Jeff Miller, Ph.D.

Article In Brief...



Thousands of years ago, God mandated the study of science, knowing that the physical evidence that proclaims His amazing works provides one of the most powerful testaments to His existence and activity in the Universe. Christian educators must be prepared to help youth see the evidence that undergirds our faith and to defend their faith. Apologetics Press now has an option for high schoolers to help make that possible.

IN 2022, at the request of one of our supporters, I began teaching my book *Flooded* in Arizona to high schoolers as a short course that they can take for high school credit (see “The Flooded Foundations of Science Course for High Schoolers” article on our website for information on future course offerings). The spiritual impact on the dozens of youth who have been able to attend over the past three years has been more profound than I anticipated, prompting us to schedule even more course options in 2025. Why is the course so valuable to Christian youth?

Many people simply do not like science. They could not stand Biology, Physics, Chemistry, and Earth Science in school. Believe it or not, even though I am now a scientist, I would have agreed with them for most of my education, prior to the final science course I took in high school. There were some key concepts missing from my public school

education that would have changed everything. It is one of my goals in life to help youth to have the right perspective about science, because I believe a lack of that perspective is a key factor in why 40%, and possibly as high as 80%, of Christian youth are leaving Christianity behind when they leave home for college.¹

The modern naturalistic monopoly on science—I’ll admit—put a bad taste in my mouth every time I was forced to study science as a younger student in junior high and high school in public school. It was natural to equate science with evolution and other false ideas that alarmed me and challenged my beliefs. No doubt many students shared my feelings and, over the years, it has caused many people to consider science and religion to be two separate domains that do not have anything to do with each other. “Trying to harmonize the two **shouldn’t** be done—and **couldn’t** be done even if you wanted to,” they

claim. To attempt to do so would be like, in the words of famous skeptic Michael Shermer, trying “to squeeze the round peg of science into the square hole of religion.” It would be a “logical absurdity” to do that, he said.² The result of such thinking has been to convince youth that the claims of Scripture (especially those that have scientific implications, like Creation and the Flood) are “unscientific” and require a “blind,” evidence-less faith to accept them.³ Many rational-minded youth, therefore, are finding (what they assume to be) more support for a natural explanation of the Universe (rather than a supernatural one), since that’s the only “side” they hear being argued from virtually every academic mountain top. “The first one to plead his cause seems right, until his neighbor comes and examines him” (Proverbs 18:17), but few are having the opportunity to hear the case of the neighbor.

The truth of the matter is that **God** owns science: He is actually the One Who initially instituted and defined science and now endorses, encourages—even **commands**—scientific study.⁴ A person must conduct science, however, from the right perspective—the biblical perspective—or his results and conclusions will often be incorrect.

As most of us studied science in school, progressing from year to year, the classes and texts tended to be divided into general categories, like “Life Science,” “Earth Science,” or “Physical Science.” As we moved into high school, we probably took “Biology,” “Chemistry,” and “Physics,” and if we pursued science in college, perhaps “Geology,” “Astronomy,” “Genetics,” “Thermal Science,” etc. While it can be convenient to use such distinctions as we teach science, there is a serious drawback to doing so if we fail to step back and keep in mind the “big picture”: the ultimate purposes of science



from a **biblical** perspective, as God intended. Having the right frame of mind about the God-given purposes of science will affect our emphasis of the subject in our lives and the lives of the youth we mentor. It will also affect the way we evangelize in some cases, and may even affect the eternal destinies of individuals in our sphere of influence.

It is important that Christian-minded parents and teachers not merely exclude un-Christian concepts while teaching (which is what many Christian schools do), but actually teach students the subjects **from a Christian perspective**. So, what should that look like in science?

TEACHING SCIENCE FROM A CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW

Authority and Mandate for Scientific Study

First, keep in mind that if God does not want us to use time doing something, we should not do it (1 Corinthians 4:6)! He has objectives in mind for His followers, and we will give an account of how we use our time (Ephesians 5:16; Colossians 4:5). And so, we should consider whether God even wants us to teach our children science. Whatever we do, “in word or deed,” should be authorized by God (Colossians 3:17; Acts 4:7). Do we have God’s authority to engage in and teach science to our students?

Absolutely. In fact, according to the Bible, **God Himself instituted the field of science**.

- When God created human beings on Day Six and told them to “have dominion” over the Earth and “subdue” it (Genesis 1:28; Psalm 8:6-8), He was commanding mankind to do something that would require extensive scientific investigation and experimentation.
- When God, through His servant Paul, said in Romans 1:20 that His existence and some of His attributes could be learned from studying His creation, He was putting His stamp of approval on the scientific study of creation—“the things that are made.”
- When He said in 1 Thessalonians 5:21 to “[t]est all things; hold fast what is good,” He was essentially summarizing the scientific method.
- By encouraging humans to study “the works of the Lord” (i.e., the things God has done, such as Creation and the Flood of Genesis 6-9), He was endorsing science (Psalm 111:2; cf. 66:5).

Scientific Disciplines Delineated in Scripture

- When God instructed Adam to name the animals, He instituted the fields of biology and zoology (Genesis 2:19).

- When He highlighted to Job the natural laws that govern the Universe, He was encouraging the study of physics (Job 38:33; cf. Jeremiah 33:25-26; Psalm 148:5-8). Several laws of science are alluded to by implication in Scripture, including the Law of Causality (Hebrews 3:4), Law of Biogenesis (Acts 17:25; 1 Timothy 6:13; Galatians 6:7), First Law of Thermodynamics (Genesis 2:1-3; Exodus 20:11; Hebrews 4:3), and Second Law of Thermodynamics (Psalm 102:25-27).
- Job 12:8-10 emphasizes geology.
- Psalm 19:1 and Genesis 15:5 encourage astronomy.
- Numbers 19 even delineates a basic recipe for antibacterial soap—chemistry in action.
- Solomon, in his inspired wisdom, endorsed the study of biological science, encouraging the study of eagles and serpents (Proverbs 30:18-19), as well as ants, badgers, locusts, and spiders (Proverbs 30:25-28).
- Jesus encouraged botany when drawing His audience’s attention to the lilies of the field (Matthew 6:28), seeds (Matthew 13:1-9, 24-30), trees and vines (Matthew 7:16-20), and grass (Matthew 6:30); ornithology by pointing to the birds of the air as an illustration (Matthew 6:26); entomology when mentioning moths (Mat-

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threw 6:19-20); and zoology when discussing sheep, dogs, and swine (Luke 15:3-7; Matthew 7:6).

- In God's sermon to Job in chapters 38-41, He chose to humble Job and instruct him by giving him, not a Bible lesson, but a science lesson covering geology, cosmology, astronomy, physics, oceanography, nomology, optics, meteorology, and biology, including zoology, ornithology, entomology, herpetology, botany, and marine biology.
- Similarly, in Psalm 104 the psalmist used beautiful figurative language to present a science lesson covering astronomy, meteorology, geology, physics, oceanography, and biology, including mammalogy, ornithology, botany, and marine biology.

Bottom line: God founded, endorsed, and encourages science. As an educator, you are a key factor in ensuring that God's desire (that we engage in science) is carried out—and that it is carried out with the right perspective and purpose in mind.

THE DEFINITION AND PURPOSE OF SCIENCE, ACCORDING TO SCRIPTURE

WHAT is science? There are probably as many definitions as there are scientific subjects (since humans determine word definitions), but a basic definition would be, "the acquisition of knowledge through study of the natural world/Universe." Naturalists argue that science seeks to determine **natural** explanations for those things we observe in nature (eliminating even the possibility of God's miraculous intervention in any aspect of the Universe throughout history). Such a diminished perspective, however, was not how science has been viewed throughout history,⁵ because it neglects the definitive evidence for God,⁶ is

irrational, and even self-contradictory.⁷ Instead, science seeks to acquire explanations—whether natural **or** supernatural—for those things we observe in nature.

The ultimate **purposes** of science are more important to Christian educators, since at least three of those are, first and foremost, defined by **God**, not man. The purpose of science is to gain knowledge (Proverbs 8:10) from observations of the natural realm (i.e., "the things that are made"—Romans 1:20) that will help humans to:

- (1) subdue and have dominion over the Earth (Genesis 1:28; 9:2) so that they can live a good life (Ecclesiastes 2:24) in service to God (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14), helping others (Ecclesiastes 3:12; Galatians 6:10; 1 Timothy 6:18⁸);
- (2) learn about God—His existence and nature (Romans 1:20; Hebrews 11:6; Psalm 19:1)—by studying the things He has done (Psalm 111:2; Romans 1:20); and
- (3) defend the truth against those who would seek to discredit it (1 Peter 3:15; Jude 3).

Logically, therefore, Creation and Flood Science should be the foundations upon which a student's study of science is built, since they are the two greatest physical works God has authored throughout Earth history. Although few scientists think about their mission in such terms, most science disciplines today are focused more on the first purpose above (at

least, a portion of it): subduing and having dominion over the Earth in order to live a good life. The second and third extremely important purposes are, sadly, often completely neglected, even in our Christian schools. Our parents and science teachers are charged with the critically important task of making sure our students/children can defend the truth, and know and do not forget about the great works of the Lord as exhibited through physical evidence in the Universe (like the Flood—Genesis 9:12-17). Yet, oftentimes, we fall down on the job, allowing the world around us—our children/students—to **forget** (2 Peter 3:3-9).

- Psalm 111:2—"The **works of the Lord** are great, **studied** by all who have pleasure in them."
- 2 Peter 3:5-9—"For this they will **fully forget**: that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of water and in the water, by which the world that then existed perished, being **flooded** with water. But the heavens and the earth which are now preserved by the same word, are reserved for fire until the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men. But, beloved, **do not forget** this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffer-



ing toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.”

Are you ready to teach youth science the way God intended? Do you have any high school age children, students, grandchildren, nieces/nephews, neighbors, or members of your church youth group who would benefit from a study of the biblical foundations of science in the Flood, solidifying their faith, preparing them for evangelism, and helping them to know more about God, all the while receiving course credit? Have them join me in Arizona for a life-changing experience.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Flavil Yeakley (2012), *Why They Left* (Gospel Advocate), p. 39; Kevin Cain (2019), “Why Are We Losing Them When They Leave For College?” Apologetics Press, <https://apologeticspress.org/why-are-we-losing-them-when-they-leave-for-college-5738/>.
- ² Michael Shermer (2007), *Why Darwin Matters: The Case Against Intelligent Design* (New York: Henry Holt), Kindle edition, p. 162.
- ³ Contrary to the teachings of Scripture. See Dave Miller (2003), “Blind Faith,” Apologetics Press, <https://apologeticspress.org/blind-faith-444/>.
- ⁴ Note: While conducting science (i.e., the study of “the things that are made”) is necessary to fulfill God’s expectations, there are certainly different levels/depths of scientific study in which a person could engage. Virtually every person engages in science in various ways, even if doing so is often an unconscious decision and at a very basic level. We are not suggesting that God expects every person to become a full-time, credentialed scientist.
- ⁵ For examples of famous scientists, considered the “fathers” of various scientific disciplines, who were biblical creationists, see Jeff Miller (2012), “You Creationists Are Not Qualified to Discuss Such Matters!” *Reason & Revelation*, 32[12]:141-143, December, <https://apologeticspress.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/1212.pdf>.
- ⁶ Dave Miller, ed. (2017), *Does God Exist?* (Montgomery, AL: Apologetics Press).
- ⁷ Jeff Miller (2017), *Science vs. Evolution* (Montgomery, AL: Apologetics Press), 2nd edition.
- ⁸ See also James 4:17 and Mark 10:45.

Does God Know the FUTURE?

Dave Miller, Ph.D.



AFTER God inflicted 10 dazzling, catastrophic afflictions on Pharaoh and the Egyptian population, the Israelites commenced their exit from Egypt. We are informed that God issued special instructions to Moses concerning their travel route:

Then it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near; for God said, “Lest perhaps the people change their minds when they see war, and return to Egypt.” So God led the people around by way of the wilderness of the Red Sea. And the children of Israel went up in orderly ranks out of the land of Egypt (Exodus 13:17-18).

It has been suggested that here we have a case where God speaks of the future in conditional terms. It is claimed that God selected a certain route for the Exodus because of what the Israelites **might** have done otherwise—thus evoking the question, “Don’t we see God here considering the possibility—but not the certainty—that the Israelites would change their minds if they faced battle?” The implication is that God’s omniscience is limited to the extent that He could not know for sure ahead of time whether the Israelites might change their minds and desire to return to Egypt. Hence, God is omniscient only in those areas where knowledge is available, but He is not omniscient in those areas that are “unknowable”—as in the case of the Israelites’ potential

decision to abandon their attempt to exit Egypt.

Such a view most certainly makes God appear to be a precarious leader of His people: “We better do it this way, no, wait, we might better do it that way.” Such thinking borders on disrespect and a demeaning view of God which misapprehends the nature of Deity—Who is infinite in all His attributes. It is difficult for we humans—who are so enmeshed in a time/space continuum—to grasp the eternality of God and the fact that He is not subject to time or, in any way, restricted, limited, or confined by time. As the creator of time, He exists outside of time. So when the Bible depicts Him speaking of the future, such references are for the benefit of humans.

The underlying Hebrew grammar in this passage does not suggest that God, Himself, was uncertain about or unaware of what the Israelites would ultimately do. Uncertainty is not built into the word, though it may be used in a sentence where uncertainty is involved. The English rendering “lest perhaps” (NKJV) or “lest peradventure” (ASV/KJV) is one word in the original. The premiere Hebrew lexicon of our day defines the Hebrew term [לִפְנֵי] as “so that not, lest”—which does not inherently or necessarily imply uncertain possibility. If there are passages where the notion of “perhaps/possibility” are present, but there are also many passages where the same Hebrew term is used with no notion of “perhaps” or “possibly,” **then the element of possibility or**

(cont. on p. 8)



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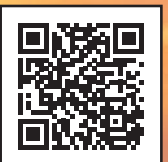
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uncertainty is not inherent in the Hebrew word. Consequently, we must refrain from imposing or forcing that element onto the passage. Consider these English translations that capture the thrust of Exodus 13:17—

Christian Standard Bible: “for God said, ‘The people **will change their minds** and return to Egypt if they face war.’”

Common English Bible: “God thought, If the people have to fight and face war, they **will run back** to Egypt.”

Holman Christian Standard Bible: “The people **will change their minds** and return to Egypt if they face war.”

The MSG: “for God thought, ‘If the people encounter war, **they’ll change their minds** and go back to Egypt.’”

These renderings rightly convey that God knew ahead of time that the Israelites **would** change their minds if they encountered the Philistine obstacle. It is stated in Scripture for the benefit of the reader.

Consider the following verses where the same Hebrew term is used that is used in Exodus 13:17—

Genesis 26:7—“The men who live there **will kill me** for Rebekah because she’s very beautiful” (CEB).¹

Genesis 26:9—“I was afraid that **you would kill me** so that you could have her” (ERV).²

Genesis 31:31—“I thought that **you would take** your daughters from me by force” (NASB).³

Genesis 44:34—“Do not let me see the misery that **would come** on my father” (NIV).⁴

Judges 7:2—“Israel **would boast** against me” (NIV).⁵

Observe that, even if the wording of a number of translations leaves the inaccurate impression that God did not know what they would do, consider: To whom was God speaking when He made the statement, “Lest perhaps the people change their minds when they see war, and

return to Egypt”? Moses had just completed an address to the entire nation regarding the necessity of an annual commemoration of their exit from Egypt. God must have been speaking to Moses and, perhaps, the elders of the nation, when He stated the rationale for His selected travel route. The verse simply reads, “and God said....” Surely, He was not just speaking into the air with no particular audience. Since they had just left Egypt, it makes perfect sense that, in His miraculous guidance of the nation via their divinely-designated leader, He spoke the words **to Moses** as an explanation for why he (Moses) was being instructed to take the route that avoided Philistine territory. In which case God was introducing **into Moses’ mind** the need for him as their leader to consider the **possibility** (which God knew to be a **reality**) that they might not follow through with their commitment to God. In that scenario, God would have been giving Moses a leadership lesson.

Built into God’s relationship with His people was the fact that He continuously placed before them two options: obey or disobey. He warned of punishment if they chose to disobey, but also refrained from punishment if they would repent and obey. So the “change of mind” that God often expressed in His dealings with Israel was not unanticipated or based on uncertainty within Himself as to what the people might do. He knew ahead of time whether they would repent, and so He reacted accordingly. There was no uncertainty or lack of knowledge involved on God’s part. Jonah 3:10 illustrates this consistent pattern: “Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it.” God’s changing responses were not due to His lack of knowledge, but

to **the people’s own free will decisions.** Just because every verse does not offer this technical explanation as to God’s operations, we must, nevertheless, assume that it applies to all such situations. So His “change of mind” is simply the application of His intention to act in relation to their actions: “If they do this, I will do this; if they do that, this will be My response.” In other words, God accommodates human limitations by couching His actions in time-laden expressions. The issue is not whether God will change His mind (as in Numbers 14:19-20), but whether He knows ahead of time that He will do so. Changing His mind does not imply limited omniscience. Human free will is so delicate and sensitive that God goes out of His way not to interfere with it or short circuit the process necessary for free will to be exercised unimpeded.

ENDNOTES

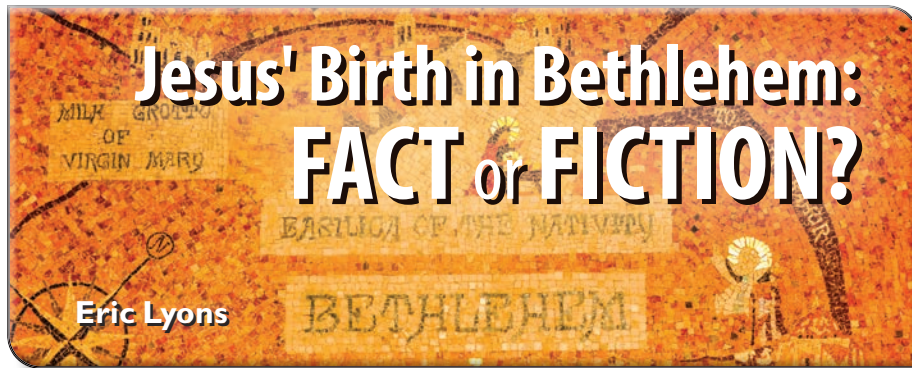
¹ Of 15 English translations, 7 have “**will** kill me,” 7 have “**would** kill him,” and 1 has “**would** kill me.”

² Of 20 English translations, 14 have “lest I die,” 2 have “lest I should die,” 2 have “I would die,” and 2 have “I will/I’ll die.” Use of the term “lest” does not suggest only possibility, since the statement that Isaac makes indicates that he concocted the lie for the very reason that he was convinced they **would** (not might) kill him if they thought she was his wife.

³ Of 34 English translations, 3 have “lest thou/you take,” 3 have “lest thou shouldst take,” “lest you should take,” 1 has “lest thou wouldst take,” 1 has “lest thou wouldst violently take away,” 1 has “thou wouldst have taken,” 1 has “He’ll take his daughters,” and 24 have “thou/you wouldst/would take.” The context shows that Jacob was confident that Laban **would** (not might) take back his daughters by force.

⁴ Judah insisted to Joseph that if he and his brothers returned to Jacob without Benjamin, it **would** devastate their father—not might, may, possibly, or perhaps—but, rather, it **would** destroy him.

⁵ God required Gideon to reduce the size of his army for the expressed reason that if such were not done, the Israelites would—for certain—take credit for their victory. The NASB has, “for Israel would become boastful.” The New Revised Standard reads, “Israel would only take credit away from me.”



ACCORDING to one of the world's most recognized atheists, Richard Dawkins, "the gospels are ancient fiction."¹ They "[a]ll have the status of legends, as factually dubious as the stories of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table"—full of "invented, made-up fiction."² Dawkins wonders why the "many unsophisticated Christians...who take the Bible very seriously indeed as a literal and accurate record of history and hence as evidence supporting their religious beliefs," do not "notice those glaring contradictions" in the gospel accounts?³ What kind of "contradictions," exactly? Consider the very first one that he mentions, regarding Jesus' birth in Bethlehem.

Supposedly, Matthew, Luke, and John give conflicting information about where Jesus was born. Dawkins wrote:

A good example of the colouring by religious agendas is the whole heart-warming legend of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem.... John's gospel specifically remarks that his followers were surprised that he was **not** born in Bethlehem.... Matthew and Luke handle the problem differently, by deciding that Jesus **must** have been born in Bethlehem after all.⁴

Exactly where did the apostle John indicate that Jesus was "**not** born in Bethlehem"? Dawkins quoted from 7:41-42, wherein the apostle recounts how, "**Others** said, This is the Christ. But **some** said, Shall Christ come out of Galilee? Hath

not the scripture said, That Christ cometh of the seed of David, and out of the town of Bethlehem, where David was?" (KJV). Does this passage teach that Jesus was not born in Bethlehem? Not at all. John merely pointed out that **some in the crowd** who were listening to Jesus asked if the Messiah would come from Galilee or Bethlehem. These individuals knew that Jesus had grown up in Galilee (just as all of the gospel accounts teach: Matthew 2:22-23; Mark 1:24; 10:47; Luke 2:39-40; 4:16; John 1:45-46; 7:27). This group simply made the assumption that, because Jesus had grown up in Galilee, he was born in Galilee. But, that simply was not true (Matthew 2:1; Luke 2:4). These individuals were ignorant of the place of Jesus' birth.⁵

How often are individuals born in one place and reared in another? I was born in Georgia, brought up in Oklahoma, went to undergraduate and graduate school in Tennessee, and yet have lived most of my life in Alabama. When people ask where I'm from, I generally say, "Alabama." I sometimes say, "I was raised in Oklahoma." I rarely say, "I was born in Georgia," yet that is where I was born. Interestingly, no one ever accuses me of contradicting myself.

BLIND FAITH OR CONTRADICTION CONFUSION?

IF Dr. Dawkins actually believes that John 7:41-42 contradicts what Matthew and Luke wrote,

then he may be so blinded by an allegiance to atheism and naturalism that he refuses to interpret the Bible fairly. (Yet, surely Dawkins desires for his readers and listeners to interpret his own writings and speeches fairly. Will he not give the Bible writers the same level of fair and honest evaluation that he expects others to give him?) Or, perhaps Dawkins is unaware of what constitutes a genuine contradiction.⁶ If John wrote that Jesus was **not** born in Bethlehem or that Jesus **was** born in Galilee, only then would there be a contradiction. However, John never wrote that **he believed** that Jesus was born in Galilee rather than Bethlehem. The apostle merely **reported** how **some** of those who listened to Jesus **imagined** that He was born in Galilee.

MISSING THE MESSIAH...AGAIN

RATHER than honestly and reasonably pointing out a legitimate contradiction, Dawkins has tragically aligned himself with the very people in John 7 who missed (or altogether rejected) the astonishing evidence for Jesus' Deity (and, in Dawkins' case, the inspiration of the Bible). The Old Testament writers specifically (and miraculously) prophesied hundreds of years earlier that the Messiah would "come forth" from "Bethlehem Ephrathah" (Micah 5:2)—i.e., **Bethlehem of Judea**.⁷ Furthermore, the prophets also perfectly predicted the Messiah (Isaiah 9:6-7) would dwell in **Galilee** and let His light shine in the land of Zebulun and Naphtali (Isaiah 9:1-2). This, too, happened just as the prophets predicted (Matthew 4:12-16).

These two marvelous pieces to the Messianic puzzle (presented 700 years earlier by Micah and Isaiah) were missed by many souls in the first century, just as they are missed by Dawkins and many others today. Yet, Christians will follow the exam-

ple of Christ (Luke 19:10; 1 Timothy 1:15) and never stop striving to help unbelievers see the Light. With God's help, we will continue demonstrating both the supernatural attributes of the Bible and the One Whom the Bible perfectly presents—the Prince of Peace, “who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4).

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Richard Dawkins (2006), *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin), p. 97.
- ² Ibid., pp. 96-97.
- ³ Ibid., p. 94.
- ⁴ Ibid., 93, emp. in orig.
- ⁵ For more information on Micah 5:2 and John 7, see Eric Lyons (2022), “Micah, the Messiah, and the Little Town of Bethlehem,” *Reason & Revelation*, 42[8]:86-89, August, <https://apologeticspress.org/micah-the-messiah-and-the-little-town-of-bethlehem/>.
- ⁶ See Eric Lyons (2013), “Dealing Fairly with Alleged Bible Contradictions—Part 2,” *Reason & Revelation*, 33[11]:122-125, 128-129, November, <https://apologeticspress.org/dealing-fairly-with-alleged-bible-contradictions-part-ii-4747/>.
- ⁷ This Bethlehem was not the Bethlehem of Zebulun (Joshua 19:15; in Galilee), but the Bethlehem of Judah, also known as Ephrath or Ephrathah. People of Bethlehem were known as “Ephrathites” (Ruth 1:1-2; 2:4; 4:11; 1 Samuel 17:12, 15; 16:1, 4).

Unicorns, Satyrs, and Cockatrices

Dewayne Bryant, Ph.D.

CHRISTIANS reading through some versions of the Bible may be puzzled when they discover references to unicorns, satyrs, and cockatrices. Critics claim that such references are evidence that the Bible is a product of a mythological worldview.¹ What's the truth of the matter?

SATYRS

ANCIENT Greek art depicted these nature spirits in various forms, but most people think of them as half-man, half-goat creatures. They were known for their love of women, wine, and music. Early English versions such as the KJV and the Geneva Bible include the term, but later versions wisely remove it because the Hebrew word *sa'ir* means “male goat.”² The

KJV contains two misleading translations for this term: “satyr” (Isaiah 13:21; 34:14) and “devil” (Leviticus 17:7; 2 Chronicles 11:15). In the latter two instances, these occurrences may be referring to goat-shaped idols.³

The term *sa'ir* appears more than 50 times in the Hebrew Bible, usually referring to a male goat. All but a handful of occurrences appear in the Pentateuch, three-fourths of which describe the animal as a sin offering (e.g., Leviticus 16; Numbers 7; 29).⁴ After four centuries of advancements in biblical scholarship, we can see that the word describes a goat, not a creature from Greek mythology.

UNICORNS

LEGENDS about these animals appear in the writings of ancient authors such as Strabo (*Geography* 15.1), Pliny the Elder (*Natural History* 8.31), and Aelian (*On Animals* 3.41; 4.52). Their descriptions vary in specific details, but sources typically describe this animal as a creature resembling a horse with a single horn protruding from its forehead. English translations as early as the 1300s mistakenly include this creature in the biblical text. However, some people try to defend its inclusion in the King James Version by saying it refers to the rhinoceros (*rhinoceros unicornis*) or real animals with rare deformities.⁵ Based on the

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uses of the term in various Semitic languages, as well as in the Hebrew Bible, this connection simply is not possible.

The Hebrew word translated as “unicorn” is *re'em*, which is related to the Assyrian word *rīmu* and the Ugaritic word *r'm*,⁶ all of which mean “wild ox.” It appears in several places in the Bible, the first of which describes the strength of Israel (Numbers 23:22; 24:8). Other texts make it clear that the *re'em* is an ox when it uses the term in parallel statements referring to calves (Psalm 29:6) and bulls (Isaiah 34:7), which also makes it unlikely to be referring to a rhinoceros—a species which existed in India and Africa but does not appear to have been native to the ancient Near East in biblical times.

Several problems occur with other references, however, as the Hebrew text of Deuteronomy 33:17 makes it clear that the *re'em* (singular) has more than one horn. The KJV translators incorrectly rendered the singular term “ox” as the plural “unicorns,” perhaps in an attempt to harmonize the elements of the passage. The book of Job depicts the *re'em* as a draft animal used for harrowing or plowing (Hebrew *sadad*; Job 39:10; cf. Hosea 10:11), which is fitting for oxen but not whimsical, magical creatures.⁷

COCKATRICES

ACCORDING to various sources, the mythical cockatrice is born from a chicken egg incubated by a toad or serpent. This creature is depicted with both avian and reptilian features, with the ability to kill other animals with a single glance (what Shakespeare called “the death-darting eye of Cockatrice”⁸). The Hebrew term translated as “cockatrice” by both the KJV and the Geneva Bible is *tsip'oni*, meaning “poisonous serpent.” The term appears in parallel

with other Hebrew words referring to serpents (Proverbs 23:32; Isaiah 11:8; 59:5; Jeremiah 8:17), making it clear that the term does not refer to a mythological creature.

The history of the cockatrice creates an additional problem for those who target older English translations in their criticism of the Bible: it appears that the creature’s origins only go back as far as the medieval period. The word first appeared in the English language in the Late Middle Ages when John Wyclif included it in his translation (1382), which heavily influenced the King James Version. It seems that the creature first emerged in European mythology as early as the twelfth century,⁹ making it an extremely anachronistic translation of the original Hebrew term.

CONCLUSION

ALTHOUGH English translations in the past have included the names of mythical creatures, this appears to have been because of human tradition rather than actual scholarship. Satyrs and unicorns may appear in Greco-Roman and early English literature, but their origins do not appear to extend back into the ancient Near East. The same can be said of the cockatrice, which does not seem to predate the medieval period. We cannot fault the biblical authors if their work was not translated accurately by scholars many centuries later.

While critics frequently condemn the biblical authors for mentioning mythical creatures, they do not appear to recognize that these references are often erroneous renderings on the part of fallible translators who could not benefit from the advancements in Hebrew scholarship that modern experts have at their disposal today. Now that scholars have a better grasp of ancient languages and the relevant

literature, we can see that anyone looking for fantastic beasts in the Bible will have to go elsewhere to find them.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The prophet Isaiah sometimes uses mythical language in a *nonliteral manner*—this is clear when he says that Egypt is like Leviathan (or Lotan, the “twisting serpent”), a monster from Ugaritic literature (Isaiah 27:1; although it has the same name, this is different from the animal mentioned in Job 41). A modern-day equivalent might be like calling a complaining woman a “harp,” a brutish or abusive man an “ogre,” or the CEO of a large corporation a “titan” in the business world. We often use mythological references in colloquial language, such as saying that a person with a notable weakness has an Achilles’ heel, that a perennially successful entrepreneur has the Midas touch, or that someone can expect trouble because he has opened Pandora’s box. Similarly, the biblical writers occasionally used such figures of speech without validating the pagan ideas behind them.
- ² R. Laird Harris (1999), “šā’ir” in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, R. Laird Harris, ed. Gleason L. Archer, Jr., & Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago, IL: Moody Press), p. 881.
- ³ Mark F. Rooker (2000), *Leviticus* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman), p. 234.
- ⁴ See references in John R. Kohlenberger III and James A. Swanson (1998), *The Hebrew English Concordance to the Old Testament with the New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), p. 1514.
- ⁵ Jason Bittel, “Real-Life ‘Unicorn’ Found; Deer Has Extremely Rare Deformity,” <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/11/141112-unicorn-deer-slovenia-antlers-science-animals/>.
- ⁶ J. Tropper and H. P. Müller (2004), “*re'em*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), 13:244.
- ⁷ See a fuller discussion in Douglas Mangum (2011), “Chasing Unicorns in the Bible,” *Bible Study Magazine*, pp. 32-33, Jan-Feb.
- ⁸ *Romeo and Juliet*, 3.2.47.
- ⁹ See discussion in Laurence A. Breiner (1979), “The Career of the Cockatrice,” *Isis*, 70[1]:30-47, March.

**NOTE FROM***The Editor*

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